

SQUEEZING THE OGADEN BASIN:

POWER AND PROTRACTED OIL AND
GAS EXPLORATION IN THE SOMALI REGION

Juweria Ali



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THE ETHIOPIA PEACE RESEARCH FACILITY

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SUMMARY

- Ethiopia's Somali Regional State (SRS) is rich in natural resources, including oil and natural gas reserves in the Ogaden Basin which covers an area of approximately 350,000 sq km comprising much of the SRS. If managed properly and fairly, these resources hold the potential to contribute to development in the regional state and the country at large. Attempts by the federal government to access the SRS's peripheral resources are, however, bound up in long histories of violence and dispossession.
- The SRS has experienced a relatively stable security climate since late 2018, after the ousting of former regional leader Abdi Mohamoud Omar ('Abdi Iley'). Beyond integrating representatives of the SRS into the Prosperity Party (PP), promises of greater political inclusion and economic redistribution made by the incumbent government, have, however, yet to be met when it comes to oil and gas.
- No transparent road map has been provided by the federal government's Ministry of Mines and Petroleum (MoMP), or the Somali regional leadership, on the government's plans to resume oil and gas exploration and future extraction in the Ogaden Basin following the 2022 expulsion of Chinese firm Poly-GCL. Meanwhile, long-standing oil and gas exploration has yet to result in extraction and export activities yielding revenues for the SRS and Ethiopia at large.
- Despite some efforts from the PP administration to engage local communities around natural resource governance, there are signs that, more broadly, it is pursuing the practices of its predecessor, the Ethiopian Peoples' Democratic Revolutionary Front (EPRDF), partly by co-opting community figures to lend legitimacy to its top-down decision-making on oil and gas management.
- Opposition members from the SRS and the diaspora are becoming increasingly outspoken in contesting unaccountable oil and gas exploration by foreign companies, abetted by the state, as well as raising awareness about related social and ecological ills. While this marks an important development in civil society activity in the SRS, it reveals the continuously contested nature of oil and gas exploration. If not adequately addressed through inclusive dialogue by the SRS leadership, it could potentially hamper

the promising peace process with the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) which has in the past demanded greater regional sovereignty and accountability over natural resource exploration and extraction.

- To date, there has been no independent environmental impact assessment (EIA) conducted in the Ogaden Basin, despite environmental and human health concerns. Poly-GCL and other companies have operated as enclaves, with few benefits accruing to the local populace. Exploration agreements such as that signed between the federal government and Poly-GCL have reinforced established hierarchies of socioeconomic exclusion, ensuring employment and contractual prospects remain concentrated among so-called ‘highlanders’—hailing from Ethiopia’s political and economic centre.
- The SRS leadership, often talked-up as an extension of the central government in Addis Ababa, needs to prove that its newfound political visibility among the senior ranks of the PP will translate into tangible benefits for the region’s population. The development of a hydrocarbon strategy should involve extensive consultations and a community-centred approach. Given that the revenue-sharing formula agreed in 2019 has been criticized for its vagueness, there is a window of opportunity for regional representatives to use oil and gas as political capital with which to enhance their national standing as well as cater towards the economic justice demanded by historically marginalised constituents in the Ogaden basin.

ABBREVIATIONS

ENDF	Ethiopian National Defense Force
EPRDF	Ethiopian People's Democratic Revolutionary Front
FDRE	Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia
HGER	Homegrown Economic Reform agenda
MoF	Ministry of Finance
MoMP	Ministry of Mines and Petroleum
MoP	Ministry of Peace
ONLF	Ogaden National Liberation Front
PMO	Office of the Prime Minister
PP	Prosperity Party
SDP	Somali Democratic Party
SRS	Somali Regional State
TCF	trillion cubic feet
WSLF	Western Somali Liberation Front

MAP: THE OGADEN BASIN, SOMALI REGIONAL STATE



INTRODUCTION

This report examines the political economy of natural resources in Somali Regional State (SRS), with a specific focus on the Ogaden Basin's oil and gas reserves. In doing so, it analyses the role of protracted and contested oil and gas exploration in shaping the post-2018 political settlement and relations between Ethiopia's federal government and the SRS. The emergence of Abiy Ahmed as prime minister in 2019 and the ousting of regional president Abdi Mohamoud Omar ('Abdi Iley') in 2018 has seen a change in the Somali region's top political and local elites. In particular, the SRS administration's decision to join the ruling Prosperity Party (PP) in 2019 represented a significant shift from its prior subordinate position under the Ethiopian People's Democratic Revolutionary Front (EPRDF). At the same time, initial fiscal reforms under the PP raised hopes for greater economic returns from natural resources, including oil and gas, for regional states such as SRS.

Even so, expectations of greater political inclusion and economic redistribution have yet to be met when it comes to decision-making concerning the oil and gas sector. This is reflected in controversies surrounding Poly-GCL Petroleum Group Holding Ltd. (Poly-GCL), a Chinese-owned company that had been exploring for oil and gas in Calub and Hilaala fields since 2013, only for its licence to be abruptly terminated in 2022. Meanwhile, the federal Ministry of Mines and Petroleum (MoMP) dismissed a 2020 *Guardian* story highlighting the severe health and environmental consequences wrought by decades of resource exploration.¹

The contested politics surrounding long-term oil and gas exploration in the Ogaden Basin highlight several issues arising from the historical legacy and current continuation of a centralized approach to resource governance under the PP. At the regional level, it has resulted in a lack of effective influence by the current Somali regional leadership over ongoing oil and gas exploration and potential future extraction activities in the SRS. Here, protracted exploration has exacerbated the 'slow violence'—characterized by socioeconomic marginalization and lack of local benefits, job opportunities, rights and consultation—experienced by communities near oil and gas fields.² Despite the presence of valuable resources in their vicinity, evidently including significant oil and gas reserves for potential future extraction and export, these communities have seen little benefit from exploration contracts and activities by foreign firms. In fact, despite exploration beginning in the imperial regime, Ethiopia has yet to progress to

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- 1 Juweria Ali and Tom Gardner, 'The mystery sickness bringing death and dismay to eastern Ethiopia', *The Guardian*, 20 February 2020. www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/feb/20/the-mystery-sickness-bringing-death-and-dismay-to-eastern-ethiopia.
 - 2 Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013.
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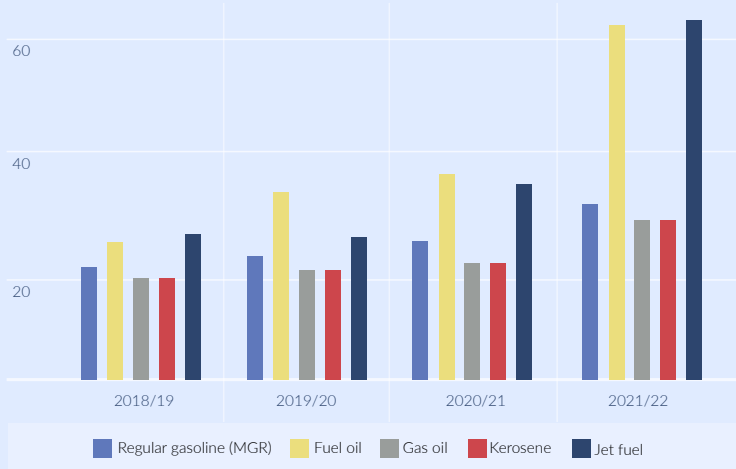
actual extraction and exportation of oil and gas. Economically, this lack of progress has led to the deferment of promised benefits, including those related to national energy self-sufficiency, earning foreign exchange and fostering local development. Additionally, the current PP government has cancelled a number of exploratory oil and gas project contracts—most recently the high-profile case of Poly-GCL—perpetuating a strategy employed by previous regimes to attract new investors to step in. Historically, while central governments accumulated rents from prolonged oil and gas exploration (e.g. company taxes, royalties, signing fees and land leases), local communities have borne the brunt of the socioeconomic and environmental consequences. This raises serious questions about why the region, despite the SRS administration’s purported increased leverage under the present federal government, has so far shown limited practical control over the oil and gas sector.

The enduring exclusion of SRS stakeholders from the oil and gas industry presents significant concerns for future stability, particularly in light of the PP government’s drive to attract investors and grant new oil and gas concessions. The lack of meaningful involvement by Somali communities in relevant decision-making processes is likely to breed resentment and resistance. Furthermore, the failure to properly address oil and gas in the peace process between the federal government and the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) represents a significant oversight, undermining the potential for a lasting resolution to conflict. For the ONLF opposition and affected communities in the Ogaden Basin, greater regional resource sovereignty remains a key political aim. Ignoring or frustrating this cause could perpetuate historically held grievances.

Although Ethiopia’s oil and gas sector is still in its infancy, competition over the exploration and extraction of hydrocarbon resources has had a significant role in shaping the region’s politics and society. Attempts by the federal state to access and appropriate SRS’s natural resources are bound up in histories of violence and dispossession, which have long gone hand-in-hand with state-making processes in Ethiopia’s peripheries. Consequently, debates around resource control, access and use in SRS remain entangled with foundational questions concerning Somali sovereignty and the regional administration’s bargaining power vis-à-vis the Ethiopian centre. In marked contrast to previous decades, the SRS has experienced a relatively stable security climate since 2018, in turn creating a favourable business environment for potential investors. The federal government’s recent efforts to lure large-scale foreign investments have partly been driven by the surge in national and global petroleum prices and Ethiopia’s foreign exchange deficit, related to a continued dependence on fuel imports. Ethiopia’s particular interest in advancing oil and gas exploration towards actual extraction and exportation in the Ogaden basin is inextricably tied to attempts to attain partial fuel self-sufficiency³ and economic sovereignty.⁴

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- 3 Fitsum S. Weldegiorgis, Berouk Mesfin and Kathryn Sturman, ‘Looking for oil, gas and mineral development in Ethiopia: Prospects and risks for the political settlement’, *The Extractive Industries and Society* 4/1 (2017).
 - 4 Luke Patey, ‘Oil, risk, and regional politics in East Africa’, *The Extractive Industries and Society* 7/4 (2020).

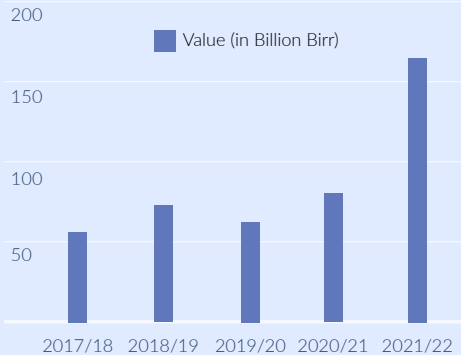
ANNUAL RETAIL PRICES OF PETROLEUM PRODUCTS IN ADDIS ABABA (Birr/Liter)



AVERAGE ANNUAL PRICE OF PETROLEUM PRODUCTS IN ADDIS ABABA (Birr/Liter)



TOTAL VALUE OF ETHIOPIA'S PETROLEUM IMPORTS



Source: Adapted from National Bank of Ethiopia (NBE) and Ethiopian Petroleum Enterprise (EPE), 2022/23.

With this in mind, this report goes beyond prevailing conceptualizations of the SRS as a periphery, instead presenting a nuanced perspective on the dynamics that have fuelled past and present disputes over natural resources. Building on this, the report provides insights into the conflict mitigation and peacebuilding strategies that have arisen in the wake of the post-2018 political settlement, following Abiy Ahmed's ascent to power and concomitant political changes in the region.

Methodology and outline

The findings and arguments made in this report are informed by empirical research carried out between September 2022 and January 2023 in the vicinity of Jeexdin and Elele reserves—specifically field sites in Obole, Qabridahare, Godey, Shilaabo and Dhobaweyn. In-depth interviews were conducted with a range of stakeholders, including traditional elders, SRS officials, *woreda* (district) representatives, civil society actors, former Poly-GCL staff, and confidential informants. While efforts were made to engage with government and community structures at all levels, the topic’s sensitivity limited access to certain strategic interlocutors. Moreover, the lack of publicly accessible documentation on the oil and gas sector restricted access to official policies and documents. This lack of transparency is reflective of the secrecy surrounding oil and gas exploration and extraction in SRS.

Section 1 of the report provides a broad overview of SRS’s recent history and current position, highlighting how, in the wider Ethiopian context, the region has served as an extractive and security frontier. Section 2 then narrows the focus to how SRS fared under the EPRDF regime and the politics of natural resources prevalent during this period. Building on this, section 3 offers a political economy analysis of SRS’s oil and gas sector, examining changes and continuities between the EPRDF era and the post-2018 period. In doing so, it assesses how the 2007 Obole attack fundamentally altered the resource politics landscape in SRS and Ethiopia as a whole. Next, section 4 discusses natural resources in terms of their detrimental environmental and health impacts, as well as the exclusionary practices of corporations regarding job access and opportunities. Section 5 delves into the politics of contestation, co-optation and resistance surrounding natural resources, drawing on the perspectives of the ONLF, elders and youth, before section 6 explores possible pathways towards more equitable resource governance in the Ogaden Basin. Finally, with the conclusion a number of key recommendations are offered.



SOMALI REGIONAL STATE: A 'PROBLEMATIC' PERIPHERY

SRS, situated in eastern Ethiopia, is the country's second largest region. The majority of its population (86 per cent) are pastoralists, alongside some agro-pastoralists and a small number of sedentary and riverine farmers. Livestock production serves as the primary livelihood source for most people, although the sector has encountered several challenges over recent decades, including drought, outbreaks of disease, and conflict over grazing land and water resources. More generally, SRS remains one of the least developed and least integrated political units in the Ethiopian federal system, its high degree of marginalization evidenced in areas such as infrastructure, child and maternal mortality rates, literacy levels and life expectancy.⁵ Moreover, the semi-arid Somali borderlands have been engulfed in violent conflict for the best part of the past century.

Efforts to achieve socioeconomic transformation in the lowland peripheries through centrally formulated top-down policies have persistently fallen short, with development strategies such as villagization, land expropriation, and conversion of grazing or farming land into commercial farms failing to yield the desired outcomes.⁶ On the contrary, such approaches have frequently led to the further marginalization of lowland communities.⁷ SRS is rich in natural resources, including oil and natural gas reserves in the Ogaden Basin, substantial uranium reserves, and minerals such as copper and iron ore. If managed and exploited properly and fairly, these resources hold the potential to contribute significantly to the economic development of the region, as well as the country as a whole. The management and exploitation of these resources has, however, led to tensions between the Ethiopian central government and Somali communities, who began protesting against oil exploration companies as early as the 1940s.⁸

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- 5 Stephen Devereux, 'Better Marginalised than Incorporated? Pastoralist Livelihoods in Somali Region, Ethiopia', *The European Journal of Development Research* 22/5 (2010): 680.
 - 6 John Markakis, 'Land and the State in Ethiopia', in *Lands of the Future: Anthropological Perspectives on Pastoralism, Land Deals and Tropes of Modernity in Eastern Africa*, eds. E. C. Gabbert et al., New York: Berghahn Books, 2021.
 - 7 World Bank, UK Department of International Development, *Poverty and Vulnerability in the Ethiopian Lowlands: Poverty and Vulnerability in the Ethiopian Lowlands: Building a More Resilient Future*, World Bank Group, 2019, <http://hdl.handle.net/10986/33422>.
 - 8 Juweria Ali, 'Ogaden Basin: A source of peril or prosperity for the Somali Region?', *Addis Standard*, 4 July 2018. <https://addisstandard.com/oped-ogaden-basin-a-source-of-peril-or-prosperity-for-the-somali-region/>.

The hallmarks of a periphery

Like other territories annexed by the Ethiopian Empire in the late nineteenth century, SRS exhibits the hallmark characteristics of a periphery: a geographically remote location, socioeconomic underdevelopment, a marginalized role in shaping political affairs, ethnonational counter-movements and a history of violence. State administrators, historically occupying the centre of power and generally located in the Ethiopian highlands, have shown little regard for the lowlands, often holding narrow views of Somali ‘lowlanders’ as ‘archetypal stateless nomads attached to an austere traditional way of life, aloof, lawless, and strongly opposed to change’.⁹

The Somali periphery played a key role in the expansion of the modern Ethiopian state, with the ‘eastern periphery’ a resource frontier used to compete for power at the centre.¹⁰ These power struggles manifested in rulers and regimes driven by a ‘civilizing mission’,¹¹ with the state’s extractive attitude towards the Somali periphery traceable back to the 1880s. Emperor Menelik II, who ascended to the throne in 1889, recognized the economic and strategic significance of the Ogaden, which served as a crucial nexus for trade routes linking Harar town to the northern Somali ports of Zeila and Berbera. In addition to its value as a livestock-rich region, the Ogaden functioned as a buffer zone against European colonial powers, such as Italy, Great Britain and France, who were seeking to expand their territories in the area.¹² The region’s persistent status as a resource frontier—a space yet to be fully controlled and exploited by the state or corporations—is partly down to the fact that incorporation of the Somali territory, resources and peoples into the Ethiopian body politic has remained incomplete and elusive and was resisted.¹³ Under Menelik II, Ethiopia was not in a position to mobilize surplus resources, and therefore its military expansion relied on living off resources available in newly conquered areas. As such, during the Abyssinian expansion towards the pastoralist areas beyond and below Harar, armed forces forcefully collected livestock as part of a head-tax known as *gibir*.¹⁴ This system of extraction provoked some of the earliest manifestations of Somali political mobilization against Abyssinian rule.¹⁵

9 John Markakis, *Ethiopia: The Last Two Frontiers*, Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer Ltd, 2011, 63.

10 Cedric Barnes, ‘The Ethiopian State and its Somali Periphery, circa 1888–1948’, PhD thesis, University of Cambridge, 2000.

11 Charles L. Gesheker, ‘Anti-Colonialism and Class Formation: The Eastern Horn of Africa before 1950’, *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 18/1 (1985): 1–32.

12 I. M. Lewis, *A Modern History of the Somali: Nation and State in the Horn of Africa*, James Currey, 2002.

13 Tobias Hagmann, ‘Beyond Clannishness and Colonialism: Understanding Political Disorder in Ethiopia’s Somali Region, 1991–2004’, *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 43/4 (2005): 512.

14 Daniel K. Thompson, ‘Border crimes, extraterritorial jurisdiction, and the racialization of sovereignty in the Ethiopia–British Somaliland borderlands during the 1920s’, *Africa*, 90/4 (2020): 746–773.

15 Thompson, ‘Border crimes’.

A history of marginalization

Pastoralism, on which the current Somali population is primarily dependent,¹⁶ is not only a mode of production but a way of life, encompassing a multitude of social, cultural and institutional practices associated with livestock keeping. Thus, pastoralists are ‘highly decentralised, diffuse, and egalitarian’, reflecting the pastoralist mode of social and economic production.¹⁷ This decentralization to the point of near invisibility constitutes an obstacle or frontier for state-makers and authoritarian regimes built on systems of surveillance. While this invisibility has helped pastoralists evade state control in the past, however, it has paradoxically made them ‘hyper-visible’ due to the centre’s stereotypical but historically entrenched attitude of Somalis as ‘defiant’ and ‘unruly’,¹⁸ with the Somali Region regarded as a ‘peripheral problem’ when it comes to state integration. This notion was inadvertently reproduced in Western characterisations of the Somali region as ‘the most problematic of the peripheral regions’ in Ethiopia¹⁹ or the Ogaden as ‘one of the most problematic examples of colonial partition’ in the Horn of Africa.²⁰ Ethiopian authors have also adopted the characterization of SRS as a ‘problem’ area,²¹ reinforcing a historical classification that continues to marginalize and stigmatize its inhabitants. Hyper-visibility, moreover, has led to Somalis being subject to heightened scrutiny based on perceived identity differences. Pastoralist development partly falls under the remit of the National Intelligence and Security Service, the federal Police Commission and the Information Network Security Agency, alongside the PP’s newly instituted Ministry of Peace (MoP), leading one Somali regional official to quip, ‘We are a national security threat’.²²

The federal government’s ambition to sedentarize pastoralists is another important manifestation of the centre’s attitude towards the lowlands. Somali pastoralists are reliant on livestock-related activities,²³ meaning their livelihoods are at risk from anything that threatens livestock production to marketing. Livelihood shocks such as droughts have been

16 Durable Solutions, ‘Somali Regional State: Durable Solutions Strategy 2022–2025’, 2022, <https://ethiopia.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbdld996/files/documents/somali-region-durable-solutions-strategy.2022.2025.pdf>.

17 Markakis, *Ethiopia*, 63.

18 Geshekte, ‘Anti-Colonialism’.

19 Sarah Lister, ‘The Process and Dynamics of Pastoralist Representation in Ethiopia’, *IDS Working Paper*, Institute of Development Studies (2004), 20.

20 Martin Doornbos, ‘The Ogaden after 1991: What Are the Options?’ in H. M. Adam and R. Ford, eds. *Mending Rips in the Sky: Options for Somali Communities in the 21st Century*. Lawrenceville: Red Sea Press (1997), 490.

21 Tibebe Eshete, ‘The Root Causes of Political Problems in the Ogaden, 1942–1960’, *Northeast African Studies* 13/1 (1991).

22 Interview with regional government official, Jijiga, 26 November 2022. According to a development practitioner in SRS, the Pastoralist Development Community Project—one of the largest World Bank-funded projects—is managed by the Ministry of Peace.

23 Stephen Devereux, *Vulnerable Livelihoods in Somali Region*, Ethiopia, Research Report 57, Brighton: Institute of Development Studies, 2006, 34–35.

exacerbated by the establishment of village settlements and semi-sedentary lifestyles, resulting in higher livestock mortality.²⁴ Moreover, lack of political voice in national decision-making has perpetuated the marginalization of Somalis in the Ethiopian national space. According to a government official in Jijiga, national policies concerning pastoralism focus on restricting or controlling movement and sedentarization, with contraband policies in particular affecting Somali livestock traders.²⁵

For over a century, the region has been a restive battleground for diverse political agendas, involving both local actors and neighbouring Somalia. Considered a violent frontier by Ethiopian state-makers, SRS has been subject to a permanent ‘state of exception’, defined as ‘a particular logic of government that is based on the normalization of exceptional strategies’ of violence and emergency rule.²⁶ Here, the 1977 Ogaden War represents a crucial episode in the Somali Region’s history of political mobilization against the state and the repercussions inflicted in response. The Ethiopian government accused the region’s Somali population of collaborating with Somali forces and the Western Somali Liberation Front (WSLF), leading to a retaliatory response that included executions and arbitrary arrests. Moreover, the war intensified existing tensions between the Somali community and the Ethiopian government, resulting in mass displacement, famine, the destruction of pastoral economies, and a deepening sense among Somalis of political and economic exclusion.

Overall, the 1977 Ogaden War was to have a long-term impact on the Somali Region, contributing to lasting political instability that would, 30 years later, lead to the April 2007 ONLF attack on an oil facility run by China’s Zhongyuan Petroleum Exploration Bureau, near Obole in Jarar zone. Over 70 personnel—both Chinese and Ethiopian—were killed in the attack. In response, then prime minister Meles Zenawi initiated a severe counterinsurgency operation. Under the pretext of preventing future attacks and weakening the ONLF, state-mandated restrictions were imposed on media, aid and trade, thereby punishing the wider civilian population for the rebels’ actions. Security forces committed grave human rights violations in the region, including the areas surrounding oil exploration sites, partly with a view to secure government access for potential resource appropriation.

24 Devereux describes the effects of the 2004 droughts in Gaashaamo district. Devereux, *Vulnerable Livelihoods*, 34–35.

25 Interview with regional government official, Jijiga, 26 November 2022.

26 Tobias Hagmann and Benedikt Korf, ‘Agamben in the Ogaden: Violence and sovereignty in the Ethiopian–Somali frontier’, *Political Geography* 31/4 (2012): 206.



Emperor Haile Selassie with Vice Minister Teshome Gabre Mariam and Tenneco Drilling Manager Bill May at Calub-1 gas discovery, 1973. Source: Purcell Collection, P&R Geological Consultants Pty Ltd, http://pandrpurcell.com/ProjectPhotos/4/Calub-visit_-HM-HS_TGMB_Mays.jpg.

Oil exploration under the imperial regime and the Derg

Oil exploration in the Somali Region began under the imperial regime in the 1940s, when US oil company Sinclair Oil Corporation arrived on the scene and began drilling,²⁷ later abandoning its project in 1963 during the *Geesh*-led rebellions.²⁸ Archival records illustrate the integral role played by the discovery of natural resources in Haile Selassie's diplomatic manoeuvres to have Britain transfer the Ogaden and Haud reserve areas to Ethiopia.²⁹ To support these

27 'Ethiopia Concedes Her Oil to Sinclair', *New York Times*, 7 September 1945, www.nytimes.com/1945/09/07/archives/ethiopia-concedes-her-oil-to-sinclair-50year-grant-of-exclusive.html.

28 Markakis, *Ethiopia*, 291. The *Geesh* was a rebel organization led by Garaad Makhtal Dahir.

29 See: FO 1015/83: Oil Concessions in the Ogaden, 1947-1949, The National Archives, Kew, Richmond, <https://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/r/C3501456>.

ambitions, Ethiopia offered the US incentives, among them oil exploration concessions in the Ogaden and attaching the Ethiopia's currency to the dollar.³⁰ The imperial centre's top-down approach partly explains why the economic dimension of Ethiopia's state formation is emphasized in Somali oral traditions that emerged in the twentieth century. Such discourses highlight the global colonial-capitalist system established on the back of resource extraction and its accompanying violence.³¹

The imperial era also saw German oil firm *Gewerkschaft Elwerath* conduct operations from 1959, while in the early 1970s, *Tenneco Oil Exploration*, an American-owned company, discovered significant reserves of gas. Moreover, Calub, the oldest natural gas reserve in the country, was identified around this time. Later in the decade, the Soviet Petroleum Exploration Expedition discovered gas, though it would go on to abandon its activities following the fall of the socialist Derg regime. The Somali territories were particularly turbulent during the Derg era (1974–1987), primarily due to the above-mentioned 1977 Ogaden War and its aftermath, which made the region unsuitable for large-scale resource exploration projects. Following the war, the Somali Region was subject to a severe economic crackdown, with restrictions on mobility and trade exacerbating the famine that ravaged the area between 1979 and 1984. The Derg regime's counterinsurgency campaign against the West Somali Liberation Front (WSLF) also involved contaminating wells vital for the survival of livestock.³² Additionally, Shilaabo—a town that has continued to be impacted by exploration activities—was razed to the ground during the 1977 conflict.³³ Consequently, economic abuse around natural resources is seen as an ongoing legacy of past state-sponsored violence.³⁴

30 John Markakis, *National and Class Conflict in the Horn of Africa*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987, 173.

31 Juweria Ali, 'Somali Resistance against Ethiopian State Nationalism: A Discursive Inquiry', PhD thesis, University of Westminster, 2022, 154. <https://westminsterresearch.westminster.ac.uk/download/7e22f282f48291e5cac5bfe531ea4ea6ef731b19987e240eb927437110504156/1687863/Final-thesis-submission-Examination-Miss-Juweria-Ali.pdf>.

32 Africa Watch, *Evil Days: 30 Years of War and Famine in Ethiopia*, New York: Human Rights Watch, 1991, 98.

33 Devereux, *Vulnerable Livelihoods*.

34 Tobias Hagmann, 'Punishing the periphery: legacies of state repression in the Ethiopian Ogaden', *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 8/4 (2014): 725–739.

EPRDF AND THE POLITICS OF OBOLE

Under the EPRDF (1991–2019), the state sought to revive previous oil and gas exploration activities.³⁵ In 1994, the World Bank extended a USD 74.31 million loan to Ethiopia for a gas development project in Calub, only for it to be suspended in 2001 due to performance-related issues.³⁶ The 2000s saw a marked increase in Ogaden Basin oil reserve explorations, largely due to the EPRDF's attempts to increase foreign direct investment and diversify the economy through rapid development of the mining and petroleum sectors.³⁷ For the remainder of the EPRDF era, companies from various countries initiated operations in the oil and gas sector, including Petronas from Malaysia; Lundin East Africa from Sweden; Afar Explorer from the USA; New Age (African Global Energy) Ltd. from the UK; Africa Oil from Canada; China's Zhongyuan Petroleum Exploration Bureau, SouthWest Energy Ltd. from Hong Kong; Poly-GCL Petroleum Investment Limited (a joint venture between China POLY Group Corporation and Hong Kong-based Golden Concord Group) from China; and the British Tullow Oil.³⁸ Ultimately, however, the majority of these companies abandoned their projects.

The EPRDF's energy policy placed strong emphasis on fuel self-sufficiency, addressing energy scarcity, meeting the demands of Ethiopia's increasing energy consumption, and mitigating the impact of rising petroleum import prices and foreign exchange deficits.³⁹ Despite this, mineral resource extraction remained largely secondary to agricultural development under the EPRDF, which may partly explain the lack of extractive progress made in the oil and gas sector during this time. Regardless, the impacts on the Somali Region were profound.

The rule of the EPRDF

It was not until 1991, when the EPRDF came to power, that Somalis were formally recognized as constituent members of Ethiopia's 'nations, nationalities and peoples'. Despite the EPRDF's

35 Markakis, *Ethiopia*, 291; See also: Jakob Grandjean Bamberger and Kristian Skovsted, 'Mapping Oil Exploration in Somalia and Ethiopia', DIIS Working Paper 2016: 2, Danish Institute for International Studies, 2016, https://pure.diis.dk/ws/files/576720/DIIS_WP_2016_2.pdf.

36 World Bank, 'Ethiopia Oil and Gas Sector Development', 2016, 5, <https://doi.org/10.1596/24774>.

37 Fitsum S. Weldegiorgis, Berouk Mesfin and Kathryn Sturman, 'Looking for oil, gas and mineral development in Ethiopia.'

38 This list of companies is not exhaustive, but see: 'Petroleum in Ethiopia: History of Ethiopian Oil & Gas Till Present', allaboutETHIO, <https://allaboutethio.com/petroleum-in-ethiopia-oil-gas-exploration-extraction.html>.

39 FDRE, 'National Energy Policy, 2013'. Revised version 2018, Ministry of Water, Irrigation and Energy, Addis Ababa.

purported attempt to reconfigure centre-periphery relations by introducing an ethnic federalist system,⁴⁰ the decentralization of power to regional states was accompanied by robust top-down processes that ultimately weakened local autonomy. As a result, the EPRDF-led Ethiopian state apparatus became more authoritarian and even more centralized than previous administrations.⁴¹

One way in which the central state increased its control was through the leadership of representatives such as long-serving SRS president Abdi Mohamoud Omar ‘Iley’ (2010–2018), who, before eventually being ousted and arrested, implemented policies aimed at subjugating Somalis. Under Abdi Iley, the Liyu Police, a paramilitary force created in 2009 to suppress the ONLF insurgency, enjoyed complete impunity and were implicated in grave human rights violations.⁴²

Under the direct supervision of the Prime Minister’s Office (PMO), the Ministry of Federal Affairs was responsible for conflict resolution, capacity-building and overseeing security in the lowland peripheries, including in SRS.⁴³ This federal institution exemplified the central government’s agenda of prioritizing security in the region over its integration and development. Hierarchical modes of belonging persisted with the designation of ‘agar’—affiliate parties not invited to be part of the ruling EPRDF coalition—while paternalistic views abounded of the peripheries being ‘backward’ or, as they were officially called, ‘emerging regions’ (specifically, Somali Region, Afar, Benishangul-Gumuz and Gambella).⁴⁴ Infantilization of these ‘peripheral’ regions was used to justify a stronger federal government and security presence, with this subordinate status deeply resented by local communities.

According to an elder residing in Haarcad town, Qorahay zone, approximately 9 km from Calub, this region has long been mired in unrest, largely due to the presence of oil and gas.⁴⁵ This points to how the discovery of natural resources was instrumentalized in deploying violence to consolidate state power in the peripheries. Essentially, the EPRDF’s mode of governance in the Somali Region was based on a permanent suspension of law and order, with the exploitation of resources playing a pivotal role in this process. Violence as a strategic mode of governance intensified in the aftermath of the previously mentioned 2007 Obole oil facility attack by the ONLF, when state–military–corporate alliances were forged to facilitate access to natural resources.

40 Dereje Feyissa, ‘Centering the periphery? The praxis of federalism at the margins of the Ethiopian State’, *The Ethiopian Journal of Federal Studies* 1/1 (2012).

41 Jon Abbink and Tobias Hagmann, *Reconfiguring Ethiopia: The Politics of Authoritarian Reform*, London and New York: Routledge, 2013.

42 Landinfo, ‘Ethiopia: The special police (Liyu Police) in the Somali Regional State’, 3 June 2016, www.refworld.org/pdfid/57bd3ea14.pdf.

43 A responsibility that now falls under the Ministry of Peace.

44 Tegegn Gebre-Egziabhere, ‘Emerging Regions in Ethiopia: Are they catching up with the rest of Ethiopia?’, *Eastern Africa Social Science Research Review* 34/1 (2018).

45 Interview with elder, Dhobaweyn, October 2022.

The impact of the 2007 Obole attack

In the 1990s the ONLF had mainly engaged the Ethiopian government in low-intensity raids on Ethiopian National Defense Force (ENDF) check-points and convoys but in the early 2000s the group intensified its insurgency. The most significant escalation occurred in April 2007, when ONLF fighters attacked an oilfield exploration facility—operated by the Chinese company Zhongyuan Petroleum Exploration—near Obole town in Degehabur zone. According to different accounts, between 50 and 70 oil workers and ENDF soldiers protecting the exploration site were killed in the surprise attack, while several others were abducted. The ONLF justified the attack, stating that Ethiopian government officials were profiting from deals with oil companies, while local communities had been dispossessed through enclosures for oil exploration deals.⁴⁶ In the years prior to the attack, the ONLF had warned that it would not tolerate ‘the exploitation of natural resources in Ogaden for the benefit of the Ethiopian regime or any foreign firm’.⁴⁷

The Obole attack was the first of many confrontations between state forces and the ONLF, with large ENDF contingents stationed in areas surrounding oil and gas sites in order to protect what had become a widely unpopular project.⁴⁸ At the same time, security forces continued to commit atrocities—including mass imprisonment, extrajudicial killings, torture and rape—in an attempt to suppress dissent and exterminate the ONLF.⁴⁹ At the time of the Obole attack in 2007, the ONLF’s stated objective of ‘protecting resources’ in the absence of a viable representative governance system greatly resonated with Somali communities at home and abroad. One informant, an ex-ONLF-combatant, emphasized the centrality of natural resource protection in rebel mobilization:

I believe I was engaged in a just struggle. I always used to think about the resources, I used to hope that it is never extracted. It is the reason behind the 2007 Obole bombing and the June 2008 Haarcad battle where the ONLF coordinated an attack against the Ethiopian military stationed in Dhobaweyn.⁵⁰

As another informant observed regarding the counterinsurgency campaign’s wider effects across the Somali Region, ‘Obole reached us all the way here in Shilaabo’.⁵¹ Others described how many communities forcibly relocated from Shilaabo—which is located over 400 km from

46 Human Rights Watch, *Collective Punishment War Crimes and Crimes against Humanity in the Ogaden area of Ethiopia’s Somali Region*, Human Rights Watch, June 2008, www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/ethiopia0608_1.pdf.

47 ONLF, ‘Statement on Malaysian Firm Petronas’ Oil Exploration in Ogaden’, *Ogaden Online*, 24 July 2005, https://web.archive.org/web/20070417085847/https://ogaden.com/ONLF_Press_Jul2405.htm.

48 Mohamud H. Khalif and Martin Doornbos, ‘The Somali region in Ethiopia: a neglected human rights tragedy’, *Review of African Political Economy* 29/91 (2002): 86.

49 Human Rights Watch, ‘Collective Punishment’.

50 Interview with ex-ONLF combatant, Jijiga, Somali region, October 2022.

51 Interview with elder, Shilaabo, 8 October, 2022.

Jijiga—in the aftermath of the Obole attack remain internally displaced today.⁵² Satellite images showed villages razed to the ground by the ENDF in order to evict communities close to oil and gas sites.⁵³

Despite the Obole attack taking place in Jarar zone, approximately 400 km away from Calub, communities around Calub were subject to forced relocation, enforced disappearances and confiscated livestock. This was reflective of the state's historical efforts to enforce sedentarization 'as a pretext for state expansion into the pastoral frontier'. Under the EPRDF, particularly after the Obole attack, a series of large-scale population resettlement programmes were initiated in the SRS, with mobile communities viewed as obstacles to the government's development initiatives.⁵⁴

During research fieldwork, upon reaching a memorial site erected for ENDF combatants in Obole, two herders approached us to inquire about our 'purpose of the visit to the Church'. While the memorial site is not a Church but may be interpreted as having 'Orthodox Christian' characteristics by the local community. Understanding why it was described as such provides an insight into the political identity divisions that the categories of centre and periphery encapsulate. For the herder, the ENDF—an embodiment of the central Ethiopian state and associated highland Christian cultural hegemony—belongs to a 'social universe'⁵⁵ that is alien to the context of Obole, where the memorial site now stands.



Obole memorial site for ENDF combatants.
Source: Author, 2022 Obole.

52 Interview with local resident, Shilaabo, 8 October, 2022.

53 Human Rights Watch, 'Collective Punishment'.

54 Benedikt Korf, Tobias Hagmann and Rony Emmenegger, 'Re-spacing African drylands: territorialization, sedentarization and indigenous commodification in the Ethiopian pastoral frontier', *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 42/5 (2015): 886.

55 Tobias Hagmann and M. Khalif, 'State and politics in Ethiopia's Somali Region since 1991', *Bildhaan: An International Journal of Somali Studies* 6 (2006): 26.

The rise of the PP

Since the EPRDF's dissolution in December 2019, one of the key political reforms pursued by Abiy Ahmed's administration has been the political inclusion of previously subordinate regional states from the peripheries—and their representative ruling parties—into the ruling PP. This has prompted concerns among Somali society regarding a potential loss of autonomy, particularly in light of the 2019 dissolution of the Somali Democratic Party (SDP), though it was still believed by the Somali public to be affiliated with the EPRDF and responsible for heinous acts of violence. Regardless of the charges it faced, the SDP had come to symbolize Somali representation within the federal system, even if this did not always translate to a significant stake in national decision-making.

SRS's new regional president, Mustafe M. Omer, attested to the PP's inclusion of the peripheries, stating 'we are the centre' in March 2022.⁵⁶ Rhetorically, this signalled a shift in the centre-periphery discourse. In practice, however, to date the SRS does not appear to wield greater decision-making powers. Moreover, the question of genuine and fair representation still stands given that many of the Somali elite interlocutors who represented SRS under the EPRDF have repositioned themselves under the PP, including finance minister Ahmed Shide and vice president Aden Farah. Concerning natural resource governance, it is unclear what degree of practical influence Somali figures can exert over oil and gas politics, as the sector continues to be centrally controlled.

The first crude oil extraction tests in the Ogaden Basin were attended by Poly-GCL executives, Abdi Iley and Ahmed Shide in June 2018.⁵⁷ Coming shortly after Abiy Ahmed became prime minister, anticipation was high. Referring to related gas deposit discoveries in the Calub gas fields, Koang Tutlam, the then minister for mines, petroleum and natural gas, claimed, 'If you remember, we are talking about a 4.7 trillion cubic feet (TCF) gas reserve. Now the recoverable gas amount [has] reached 6-8 TCF. The amount has increased significantly'.⁵⁸ Aided by the region's rapid political transformation and the loosened security regime that would lead to Abdi Iley's ousting as SRS president in August 2018, the citizens of Shilaabo organized a protest against the first crude oil extraction tests. Hoping briefly to align himself with Abiy Ahmed, in order to cling on to regional power in SRS,⁵⁹ Abdi Iley publicly utilized the now-famous slogan 'ONLF ha shidaalaysato' ('let ONLF join in benefiting from the oil')⁶⁰ during his final months in

56 Mustafe M. Omer, Twitter, 25 March 2022, https://twitter.com/mustafe_m_omer/status/1503725995777576966?lang=eng.

57 Juweria, 'Ogaden Basin'.

58 Kaleyesus Bekele, 'Oil in Ogaden', *The Reporter*, 24 March 2018. <https://www.thereporterethiopia.com/4591/>.

59 Zecharias Zelalem, "'It wasn't me!' Under fire Abdi Iley pleads innocence in unhinged speeches amid dismissal rumours", *OPride*, 12 July 2018, <https://www.opride.com/2018/07/12/it-wasnt-me-under-fire-abdi-iley-pleads-innocence-in-unhinged-speeches-amid-dismissal-rumours/>.

60 See: 'ONLF Hatimaado Oo Ha Shidaalaysato', *Rayi Tube*, 16 May 2021. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1MphDLAoRLY&ab_channel=RAYITUBE.

power, indicating to the ONLF that it was politically safe to return to the region and implying that he was open for reconciliation.

The development of the oil and gas sector, driven by Poly-GCL's arrival and promises of having discovered sufficient oil for extraction,⁶¹ was presented by Somali regional elites as offering SRS a strategic tool with which to re-position itself in the post-2018 political landscape. Beyond their promised financial benefits, oil and gas thus re-emerged as strategic resources around which the PP leadership's relations with newly configured political forces in the SRS would choreograph and determine the state's future approach of extracting natural resources and economic rents.



Ceremony of Poly-GCL's launch of crude oil extraction, with former SRS president Abdi Mohamoud Omar, right, and current Minister of Finance, Ahmed Shide, center. Source: Poly-GCL, 28 June 2018 <http://www.gcl-power.com/en/about/newdetail/5099.html>

61 'Ethiopia says China's POLY-GCL to start gas drilling by July', Poly-GCL, 16 June 2015, www.gcl-power.com/en/about/newdetail/5207.html; Nizar Manek, 'GCL-Poly Strikes Oil, More Gas Reserves in Ethiopia', Bloomberg, 26 March 2018, www.nizarmanek.com/reporting/2018/3/26/gcl-poly-strikes-oil-more-gas-reserves-in-ethiopia-reporter.

THE POST-2018 POLITICAL ECONOMY OF OIL AND GAS

When Chinese-owned Poly-GCL started crude oil extraction tests in the Ogaden Basin's Hilala oil fields in June 2018, Abiy Ahmed announced that fossil fuel production would bring employment and economic development to the country.⁶² Four years later, in August 2022, the MoMP received study results from Netherland, Sewell & Associates, Inc. on the economic feasibility of the country's natural gas and oil.⁶³ The ministry duly announced that the calculated volume of reserves held in the Ogaden Basin's three fields (Calub, Hilala, Dohar) was 7 TCF.⁶⁴ Compared to the other companies that previously operated in the Ogaden Basin, more data became available on Poly-GCL's activities due to the region's sudden accessibility to researchers and civil society groups, following the temporary opening of the political space in 2018. This access exposed inconsistencies between the proclaimed abundance of oil and gas and actual extractive activities on the ground. Thus far, progress has been complicated by disagreements between Poly-GCL and the Ethiopian government, with the latter announcing in September 2022 that it had revoked Poly-GCL's natural gas and crude oil exploration production licence.⁶⁵

The MoMP had stipulated that Poly-GCL register 30 per cent equity capital—amounting to USD 4.2 billion—at the National Bank of Ethiopia. The letter of contract termination sent by the MoMP to Poly-GCL cited the company's failure to fulfil this requirement.⁶⁶ Additionally, the ministry highlighted that Poly-GCL had neglected to pay USD 1.7 million in community development funds since 2017, and the company's non-compliance with exploration obligations

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- 62 Addis Getachew and Munira Abdelmenan Awel, 'Ethiopia begins first-ever crude oil production', AA, 28 June 2018, www.aa.com.tr/en/africa/ethiopia-begins-first-ever-crude-oil-production/1190035; 'POLY-GCL Petroleum Group successfully produced the first barrel of crude oil in Ethiopia', Poly-GCL, 28 June 2018, www.polygcl-petro.com/en/site/news_con/87.
- 63 'News: Ethiopia's first certificate on gas reserves shows presence of seven trillion cubic feet in Ogaden Basin', *Addis Standard*, 26 August 2022. <https://addisstandard.com/news-ethiopias-first-certificate-on-gas-reserves-shows-presence-of-seven-trillion-cubic-feet-in-ogaden-basin/>.
- 64 Anita Anyango, 'Ethiopia discovers 7 trillion cubic feet of natural gas in Ogaden', *Pumps Africa*, 28 August 2022, <https://pumps-africa.com/ethiopia-discovers-7-trillion-cubic-feet-of-natural-gas-in-ogaden/#:~:text=Ethiopia%20has%20announced%20a,natural%20gas%20in%20the%20Ogaden>.
- 65 For the 'Press Release on Poly-GCL contract termination', see: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=67y07EsE7tg&ab_channel=TakeleUmaBanti.
- 66 'Business: Much vaunted Chinese POLY-GCL facing ultimatum over unregistered equity capital, more than \$10M in community devt and failed exploration fees', *Addis Standard*, 26 March 2022, <https://addisstandard.com/business-ministry-gives-ultimatum-for-chinese-owned-poly-gcl-to-register-equity-capital-pay-more-than-10m-in-community-devt-failed-exploration-fees/>.

in blocks 17 and 20. As a result, Poly-GCL was required to pay an outstanding USD 10 million in accordance with the Petroleum Production Sharing Agreement (PPSA) it had signed with the government.

The cancellation of Poly-GCL's contract came as part of the government's new policy of targeting mining and petroleum companies that have not made satisfactory progress in their investment projects.⁶⁷ This hard-line regulatory approach fits into a broader pattern of previous cancellations of oil and gas concessions in SRS. It also highlights a continuous cycle of project invitations and cancellations, and perpetual delays to oil and gas extraction and exports. Consequently, the government only ever reaps basic fees and taxes ('rental payments', etc.) from the exploration area leased and licence held by the company. These are minor amounts compared to the potential windfalls that could be had from actual shared production and export incomes.⁶⁸ Given this tendency, Poly-GCL's contract cancellation was followed by



Poly-GCL road sign
Source: Author, October 2022.



Poly-GCL exploration facility
Source: Author, October 2022.

67 Kaleyesus Bekele, 'Ministry drafts new mining, petroleum proclamations', *The Reporter*, 26 January 2019, www.thereporterethiopia.com/7297/.

68 FDRE, 'Model Petroleum Production Sharing Agreement', Ministry of Mines, 26 August 2011, [https://web.archive.org/web/20170302090347/http://www.mom.gov.et/upload/Model%20Petroleum%20Production%20Sharing%20Agreement\(MPPSA\).pdf](https://web.archive.org/web/20170302090347/http://www.mom.gov.et/upload/Model%20Petroleum%20Production%20Sharing%20Agreement(MPPSA).pdf).

speculation that US companies were ‘lining up to take over’ its concessions.⁶⁹ But in a January 2023 interview, the then MoMP minister Takele Uma dismissed this, contradicting the notion put forward by some commentators that the Chinese company’s expulsion was driven by geo-political reckoning.⁷⁰ Under the leadership of the new minister, Habtamu Tegegne, the MoMP announced that American, Chinese, Italian and Russian companies had shown an interest in resuming oil and gas exploration.⁷¹ The ongoing bidding and contractual process in 2023 continues to be an intransparent and centralized affair that administratively proceeds through the federal MoMP.

Oiling the political transition: from periphery to centre?

SRS is frequently depicted as having assumed a more prominent role in Ethiopia’s post-2018 power configuration. Despite this, challenges persist in consolidating the region’s political transition in ways that serve the socioeconomic interests of the local populace.

Article 40(3) of the Ethiopian constitution states that natural resource rights belong to the state and the peoples of Ethiopia, with the federal government exercising exclusive control—via the MoMP—over natural resource management.⁷² A 2016 review conducted by the World Bank, however, indicated that Ethiopia did not have a ‘clearly stated petroleum policy’.⁷³ Since then, a couple of key institutional changes to oil and gas governance and the attendant fiscal benefit streams have been implemented under the PP’s newly empowered regional administration.

Firstly, a regional Mines, Energy and Petroleum Bureau under the jurisdiction of SRS president Mustafe Omer was established. This does not, however, change the fact that, as per the constitution, regional states can only engage in natural resource activities to the extent they are mandated to do so by federal law. This places limitations on the tasks a local bureau can carry out independently, meaning that in practice the command and control structure governing oil and gas remains centralized and top-down.

Secondly, in 2019, Ethiopia’s upper house passed a new revenue-sharing bill setting out a formula

69 Rashid Abdi, Twitter, 22 September 2022. <https://twitter.com/RAbdiAnalyst/status/1572971385143832577>.

70 ‘Mining for Ethiopia’s success’, Capital, 14 January 2023. www.capitalethiopia.com/2023/01/14/mining-for-ethiopias-success/.

71 Helen Tesfaye, ‘አፈት የውጭ ኩባንያዎች የተፈጥሮ ጋዝ ለማልማት ፍላጎት አላቸው’ (transl. from Amharic: Four foreign companies showed interest in developing natural gas’), *The Reporter*, 13 August 2023. <https://www.ethiopianreporter.com/121328/>.

72 Proclamation No. 295/1986 is the main federal legislation governing the exploration and production of petroleum resources. In addition, Petroleum Operations Income Tax Proclamation No. 296 of 1986 and Petroleum Operations Income Tax Proclamation (amendment) No. 226 of 2000 directly affect petroleum operations.

73 World Bank, ‘Ethiopia Oil’.

for distributing oil exploration earnings between the federal and regional governments.⁷⁴ Under this formula—considered a milestone in demarcating ‘who is entitled to what’—revenue is to be divided equally between the federal government and the regional state in which an oil resource is discovered. Of the federal government’s 50 per cent share, 25 per cent is to be distributed to other regions, while 10 per cent of the regional state’s share is to be allocated to the specific area where the resource is found.⁷⁵ Nonetheless, the revenue-sharing formula provides no details regarding the seven types of taxes payable by oil, gas and mining companies, namely: 1) royalties;⁷⁶ 2) licence fees; 3) penalties; 4) land rentals; 5) signature bonuses; 6) production bonuses; and 7) training fees.⁷⁷ Plans for social payments to promote local community development initiatives also remain unaddressed. Although the PP’s 2020 Homegrown Economic Reform agenda (HGER) restates the importance of developing the mining sector for the economy and acknowledges that the sector’s institutional capacities need to be enhanced, it falls short of providing the details of how this might be achieved.⁷⁸

SRS officials interviewed for this report cited a lack of clarity in the revenue-sharing bill’s language, as well as the fact it was introduced with minimal consultation less than a year after Abiy Ahmed’s appointment as prime minister. Indeed, secrecy and lack of transparency has surrounded both the government’s extraction plans—a charge applicable to the EPRDF regime and to the current PP administration—and the day-to-day activities of Poly-GCL, whose operations have proved inaccessible, despite the company proclaiming to be open to public consultation.⁷⁹

Nevertheless, changes in the post-2018 security landscape have meant that local officials can now visit exploration sites and consult community members on their experiences concerning

74 SRTV, ‘Golaha fadareeshinka JDFI ayaa maanta ansixiyiy heshiiska lagu qaybsan’, *Facebook*, 8 June 2019, www.facebook.com/SRTVSomali/videos/golaha-fadareeshinka-jdfi-ayaa-maanta-ansixiyiy-heshiiska-lagu-qaybsanyo-khayraa/640348913100453/.

75 *Addis Standard*, Twitter, 24 October 2019, <https://twitter.com/addisstandard/status/1187405713049620485>. According to the previous formula, 70 per cent of revenue from excise tax and VAT went to the federal government, with the remaining 30 per cent going to the regions. Additionally, under the previous formula, 60 per cent of the income from minerals went to the federal government, with the remaining 40 per cent going to the host region.

76 For details on distribution of royalties and profit tax from large-scale mining and petroleum and gas operations, see: FDRE, ‘Macro-Fiscal Performance in Ethiopia and Recent Fiscal Policy Developments’, Ministry of Finance, October 2021, www.mofed.gov.et/media/filer_public/44/33/44336247-02d5-499b-91f1-3427f8db22ed/final_macro-fiscal_performance.pdf#page=63.

77 Ethiopia Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI), ‘EITI Report for the year ended 7 July 2017’, August 2019, 47, https://eiti.org/sites/default/files/attachments/ethiopia_eiti_report_2016-17.pdf.

78 FDRE, ‘A Homegrown Economic Reform Agenda: A Pathway to Prosperity’, March 2020, www.mofed.gov.et/media/filer_public/38/78/3878265a-1565-4be4-8ac9-dee9eaf4f1a/a_homegrown-economic-reform_agenda-_a_pathway_to_prosperity_-_public_version_-_march_2020-.pdf.

79 “Listen to the voice of employees and grow with the enterprise” Poly-GCL Petroleum Group Held A Staff Representative Meeting’, Poly-GCL, 18 November 2020, www.polygcl-petro.com/en/site/news/1.

oil and gas. Likewise, political shifts have presented the SRS leadership with an opportunity to wrest some degree of power over natural resource governance away from the centre, for example through the previously mentioned Energy, Mines and Petroleum Bureau. Thus, since 2018, the status quo that rendered regional states such as SRS marginal has been the subject of heightened debate, with finance minister Ahmed Shide stating at a press conference in August 2019 that ‘The center-periphery distinction is no more. Everywhere is a center’,⁸⁰ and SRS president Mustafe Omer asserting ‘Our “claiming the center” politics is paying off!’⁸¹

In August 2018, following the appointment of Mustafa Omer as the President of Somali Region, the federal government signed a peace agreement with the ONLF in Asmara, Eritrea on 21 October of the same year, thereby putting an end to decades of armed conflict in the region.⁸² The significance of this rare period of peace cannot be understated, and must be leveraged. According to a senior Somali Regional State (SRS) cabinet member, as an administration they have ‘carved out this political space’.⁸³ This assertion points to the calibre of a more educated and professional class of regional representatives compared to previous administrations but is also representative of the static nature of the government’s approach to the historically marginalised peripheries. Regional officials are not necessarily ‘given’ access to political space but have to ‘carve’ this out. As a senior SRS cabinet official observes, there is:

still a long way to go on oil and gas—this sector has always been managed by the centre, it is politically sensitive and there is slight improvement in sharing some information. We had discussions with the centre on improving our role, to have more of a say on how this strategic resource is managed and extracted. I think we have made some very insignificant progress.⁸⁴

The limits of local agency

Whether due to national political instability or the conflict in the north of Ethiopia, which has significantly weakened the centre, Somalis currently appear well positioned to assert themselves. As the senior official quoted above stated, ‘I believe we represent the people, and the government should play a bigger role in oil and gas’.⁸⁵ Similar sentiments on local agency were expressed by segments of SRS’s civil society, with an interviewed pharmacist from Dhobaweyn, explaining he believes that:

80 Hallelujah Lulie, Twitter, 28 August 2019, <https://twitter.com/halelule/status/1166732226345807878>.

81 Mustafe M. Omer, Twitter, 25 March 2022, https://twitter.com/mustafe_m_omer/status/1503725995775769666?lang=eng.

82 FDRE and ONLF, ‘Joint Declaration Between the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia and the Ogaden National Liberation Front’, 21 October 2018, Asmara, Engl. translation, The University of Edinburgh, Peace Agreement Database. <https://www.peaceagreements.org/viewmasterdocument/2231>.

83 Interview with SRS official, Jijiga, 24 November 2022.

84 Interview with senior cabinet official, Jijiga, October, 2022.

85 Interview with senior cabinet official, Jijiga, October, 2022.

Mustafe is more powerful than the centre. ... the new regional elites under PP are better placed to fight for Somali rights in Ethiopia. ... Somali regional leaders are ultimately responsible for our rights and entitlements around natural resources. Individual or uncoordinated activism is not far-reaching, only a united leadership and community groups can effect change.⁸⁶

Despite these claims, expectations of change from the local Somali leadership—in terms of better representation—is more a reflection of a shift in regional leadership style, together with the absence of an armed insurgency, than any tangible change in how the centre administers the periphery. Moreover, widespread scepticism regarding the legitimacy of elected officials following the 2021 national elections has raised doubts about their ability to represent strategic Somali interests. According to a young trader residing in the outskirts of Calub:

The absence of democracy implies that our leaders cannot effectively advocate for our interests since they are aware that if they deviate from the status quo [i.e. the federal agenda], the federal government will appoint someone else to take their place. Therefore, regional elites do not wield more power under the current government than they did previously under EPRDF. If Abiy Ahmed decides to replace President Mustafe Omer today, there is nothing that can stand in his way.⁸⁷

This state of affairs is primarily down to the centralized approach employed by the PP when appointing or dismissing officials, and even more importantly the pre-eminence of the party system in governing the state.

86 Interview with pharmacist, Dhobaweyn, 6 October, 2022.

87 Interview with young man, Shilaabo, 20 November 2022.

ENVIRONMENTAL, HEALTH AND SOCIOECONOMIC IMPACTS

In 2020, the *Guardian* newspaper reported on the health and environmental crisis facing communities living around Calub, where Poly-GCL had been prospecting for oil and gas since 2014. The article, co-authored by this author, detailed allegations of toxic contamination, chemical spillages, environmental destruction, and widespread cases of diseases previously unknown in the locality.⁸⁸ It also highlighted significant continuities in the state's approach to resource extraction, in particular depictions of the lowlands as 'empty' and Somalis as having no permanent settlement.⁸⁹

Responding to the article, Ketsela Tadesse, director of the MoMP's Petroleum Licensing and Administration Directorate, denied the allegations and described the areas around the oil and gas exploration sites as 'unoccupied'.⁹⁰ This position was reinforced in April 2020, when the government unequivocally denied the article's findings based on a 'fact-finding' mission led by representatives of the federal MoMP and the SRS Health Bureau and Energy, Mines and Petroleum Bureau.⁹¹ The recommendations contained in the unpublished report diverted attention away from community concerns around resource rights, health and the environment, and instead prescribed 'awareness creation' about petroleum exploration.⁹²

This serves to illustrate the subordinate role played by regional and sub-regional levels of government when it comes to representing local Somali interests. In this respect, communities living in the vicinity of Jeexdin are keenly aware that federal authorities view them as 'duur-jooq' ('wild species')—an 'untamed', landless people without legal entitlements.⁹³ Such depictions have resurfaced in light of Ketsela Tadesse's description of Jeexdin as essentially

88 Juweria and Gardner, 'The mystery sickness'.

89 See also: Assebe Regasse, Yetebarek Hizekiel and Benedikt Korf, "'Civilizing" the pastoral frontier: land grabbing, dispossession and coercive agrarian development in Ethiopia', *Journal of Peasant Studies* 46/5 (2019).

90 Zecharias Zelalem, 'US businessmen are close to exploiting Ethiopia's oil plans in a multibillion-dollar scheme', *Quartz*, 22 December 2020. <https://qz.com/africa/1948044/us-company-targets-ethiopias-fledgling-oil-industry-with-scheme>.

91 'Ministry Dismisses Baseless Report of "Mystery Sickness" by Guardian UK', ENA, 27 April 2020, www.ena.et/en/?p=14062.

92 The unpublished report is titled: 'Preliminary report on investigation on allegation of a "mysterious sickness and death" in the natural gas development project area, Ogaden, Eastern Ethiopia'.

93 Interview with elder, Dhobaweyn, 8 October 2022.

empty, thereby designating the vicinity of oil and gas sites as an ‘asocial void, depopulated space without socioecological complexity’.⁹⁴

Environmental and health consequences

To date there has been no independent environmental impact assessment conducted in the Ogaden Basin, despite the environmental destruction wrought on areas in the vicinity of exploration sites. ‘Line clearances’ is the term given to the roads Poly-GCL cleared by cutting through whatever stood in its way, including culturally significant, centuries-old trees and common properties such as grazing sites. Locals refer to these line clearances as ‘*Jinni Faley*’ (‘paved by the devil’).

Lack of basic government services in remote settlements and exposure to humanitarian risk factors makes local communities more vulnerable to health risks associated with natural resource exploration. According to a health worker in Dhobaweyn, most of the referrals they receive are from Jidhacle, Haarcaano, Dhalaalo, Dharkayn-weyd and Cowlasaar—the closest areas to fenced-off Calub wells.⁹⁵ Serious health issues and symptoms associated with liver disease are routinely dismissed by local health workers as malaria or what is locally termed ‘*qaniin*’, ‘*raqtir*’ or ‘*baal-daqs*’—all referring to some form of insect bite.⁹⁶ There is a local well in Haarcad known as ‘*sunle*’ (‘the poisoned’), named after an incident in which 73 cattle died due to acid spillage around the well.⁹⁷

SRS as a whole, including areas around Calub, faces critical water shortages. Moreover, a 2019 overview of humanitarian needs in SRS by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs indicates that 34 per cent of the region’s population requires humanitarian assistance due to limited access to basic services or disruptions in basic goods and services.⁹⁸

Socioeconomic exclusion

The belief that the existence of oil and gas is directly responsible for the destruction of livelihoods and the environment is a common perspective among communities around Jeexdin, as exemplified by statements such as ‘the only thing it has brought us, is trouble. We wish it was never there’.⁹⁹ Mistrust of state interventions lie at the heart of these concerns, with

94 Gavin Bridge, ‘Resource Triumphalism: Postindustrial Narratives of Primary Commodity Production’, *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space* 33/12 (2001).

95 Interview with health worker, Dhobaweyn, October 2022.

96 Interview with community organiser, Jigjiga, 26 November 2022.

97 Interview with elder, Dhobaweyn, October 2022.

98 OCHA, ‘Somali Region—Snapshot of the 2019 Humanitarian Needs Overview (as of February 2019)’, April 2019, <https://reliefweb.int/report/ethiopia/ethiopia-somali-region-snapshot-2019-humanitarian-needs-overview-february-2019>.

99 Interview with community elder, Shilaabo, 8 October, 2022.

one traditional elder from Shilaabo calling for ‘a transparent process where we will not be deceived—the government usually deceives us’.¹⁰⁰

There have been significant entry barriers for Somalis wishing to participate in the oil and gas sector, with the state showing little interest in making resource opportunities—such as employment at exploration sites, contracts and other benefit streams—more accessible and inclusive. For the most part, Poly-GCL and other companies have operated as enclaves, with an interviewee from Dhobaweyn claiming that, ‘around 5,000 are estimated to have been working in Calub over the past few years ... and out of all the people that live in Dhobaweyn, there were merely two young men who worked as drivers there’.¹⁰¹ This sense of alienation and exclusion is further elaborated by another informant, who observed that, ‘Other people from other parts of Ethiopia come and benefit ... But the people who live among it don’t get anything’.¹⁰²

These concerns fall within the scope of the agreement signed between the MoMP and Poly-GCL, which fails to acknowledge any particular entitlements in terms of local employment for those in the vicinities of exploration sites.¹⁰³ Instead, it reinforces established hierarchies of socioeconomic exclusion within the Ethiopian national context, ensuring that employment opportunities and contractual prospects remain largely concentrated among ‘highlanders’.

100 Interview with traditional elder, Shilaabo, 9 October 2022.

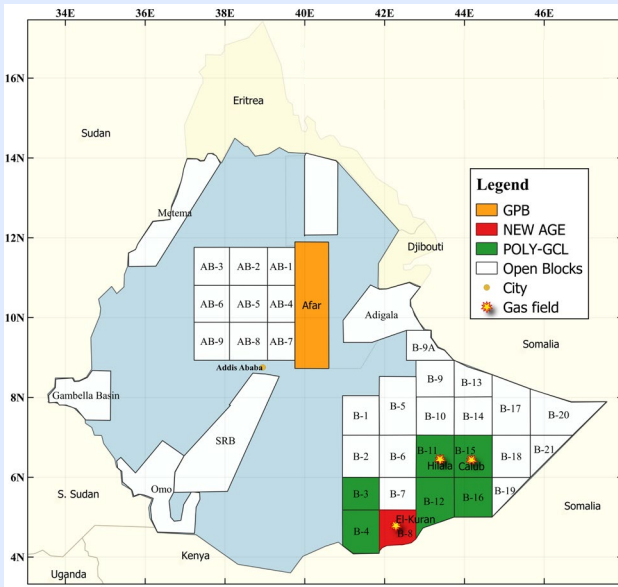
101 Interview with pharmacist, Dhobaweyn, 6 October 2022.

102 Interview with elder, Shilaabo, 5 October 2022.

103 FDRE, ‘Model Petroleum Production Sharing Agreement’.

CONTESTATION, CO-OPTATION AND RESISTANCE

From 2014 to 2018, issues arising from Poly-GCL's activities in the Ogaden Basin—including displacements, enforced disappearances, deforestation and persistent intimidation—were suppressed. This is indicative of the highly oppressive political environment prevalent in SRS during that period. Moreover, Somalis have long been subject to brutal violence arising from repressive resource governance. During the EPRDF era, military officers stationed around restricted drilling zones committed mass killings and displaced pastoralist communities from their grazing lands, with Dhobaweyn elders describing having witnessed officers indiscriminately slaughtering both camel herders and their animals.¹⁰⁴



Petroleum Concession Map of Ethiopia. Source: Adapted from FDRE, 'Applying for a Petroleum License', Ministry of Mines and Petroleum. <https://web.archive.org/web/20221129171340/http://www.mom.gov.et/index.php/petroleum/petroleum-production-sharing-agreements/>.

104 Interview with two elders, Dhobaweyn, 7 October 2022.

It is little wonder, then, that federal and regional officials continue to face considerable resistance when it comes to oil and gas resource management. Such contestation is driven by diverse interests: at one end of the spectrum, the primary cause of dispute relates to representation and just entitlements, while at the other end there exists fundamental opposition to the central state's prerogative to access natural resources. Below, the report presents how such contestation plays out in terms of the ONLF, Somali youth and elders, and the implications arising for local resistance to oil and gas extraction.

The ONLF

A former ONLF combatant used the proverb, 'A pigeon does not drink by having its head forced down', to explain the inevitability of resistance to state attempts to exert control over natural resource governance. The ONLF's group identity is rooted in a long history of self-determination for the Somali people. As much as the group considered itself as 'human rights defenders' and was engaged in a counter insurgency against the EPRDF's subjugation of the Somali region and its people, the ONLF was also engaged in a struggle over who had the legitimate right to claim and benefit from the region's natural resources. Following the Asmara peace agreement with the Ethiopian government in October 2018, the ONLF de-escalated its rhetoric. Nevertheless, the potential remains for oil and gas-related tensions to be reignited. In the Somali national imagination, resources constitute a crucial asset for political mobilization, binding communities together against a federal government whose moral and political legitimacy has been tarnished by a history of violence and subjugation.

The ONLF have in the past articulated clear demands regarding natural resources, one of which was that resources should not be exploited as long as conflict persists. In a 2007 interview, Shukri Ilbir, a senior ONLF commander who led the Obole attack, claimed 'we gave warnings to these companies, but they ignored them. And, we told them that the resources cannot be exploited'.¹⁰⁵ The ONLF has consistently emphasized the urgency of reparatory justice, not only regarding oil, but in relation to historical state violence. This has been a key priority for the group, taking precedence over any specific material demands concerning resource-sharing.

In June 2018, following gas production tests in the Hilaala oil fields, ONLF spokesman Cadaani Hirmooge issued statements indicating that the group would oppose resource extraction until the political crisis in SRS was resolved and genuine self-determination were realized.¹⁰⁶ In doing so, he highlighted the historical exclusion of Somalis, raising questions about how resources could be shared with the rest of the country if Somalis were unable to benefit themselves. Such questions still stand, given that oil and gas did not feature in the demobilization pact agreed

105 'New York Times Video Report on ONLF - Ogaden Somali Fighters', YouTube, 20 April 2008, www.youtube.com/watch?v=EIMleZk9PA8&t=1s.

106 Dhagayso: Jabhadda ONLF oo sheegtay in ay ka hor imanayaan shidaalka laga soo saarayo Itoobiya' (transl. from Somali: 'ONLF rebels say they are opposing oil extraction in Ethiopia'), *BBC News Somali*, 29 June 2018. <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=10156098279959475>.

between the ONLF and the federal government in 2018.

In addition to the material significance of oil and gas, and its potential for generating revenue for regional and local-level development, public engagement reveals how the Somali resource frontier has become a ‘material-semiotic’ space where local and state narratives around resources are fiercely contested.¹⁰⁷ But oil and gas are also increasingly being explored in settings beyond the Ogaden Basin, including in the Abay Basin across the Afar, Amhara and Tigray borderlands, the Mekelle Basin in Tigray region, the Southern Rift Basin in the Southern Ethiopia region and in Melut/Gambella Basin extending from South Sudan into the Gambella region. As such, discursive contestations around the extraction of natural resources have become more widespread in Ethiopia since 2018, unlike the past when the ONLF was the dominant opposition voice around oil and gas as it engaged in an insurgency against the EPRDF-led Ethiopian state.

Youth

In January 2023, popular artist Ali ‘Dhaanto’ released a song entitled ‘Petrol’, containing the following lyrics:

aaway baasiinkeenii iyo macdanteenii badneyd? (Where is our oil and our countless natural resources?)

Afka baarkiisa iyo ma bilaash bey noqdeen? (Are they worthless or was it mere lip service?)

Dadku baahanaa, balamuhu badnaa, (The people are so hungry, and the promises are so many)

Sow patroolkaygiyow kaama gaajo baxo? (Dear petrol, when will I benefit from you?)¹⁰⁸

These uncompromising lyrics, which articulate a longstanding quest for socioeconomic justice in the Somali periphery, point to a liberalization of the permitted discourse surrounding natural resources. They also illuminate the enduring paradox between state plans to monetize natural resources and the status quo of rampant poverty and economic exclusion in SRS. Beyond this, songs such ‘Petrol’ are indicative of a generational material-discursive conflict, with Ali Dhaanto expressing his frustration that the oil and gas sector has not been developed to meet local needs. The younger generation’s call to ensure the benefits of these currently underutilized resources are equitably distributed represents a significant departure from traditional discourses surrounding oil and gas, which until recently were dominated by the

107 Bridge, ‘Resource Triumphalism’.

108 Ali Dhaanto, ‘Ali Dhaanto 2023 – New Video (Petrol) - Dhaanto Cusub - Dhaantadi Batroolka’, YouTube, 5 January 2023, www.youtube.com/watch?v=Im8OmEoBtuw.

ONLF's demands for 'no extraction'.¹⁰⁹ While the ONLF no longer officially states that self-determination must come before extraction, as previously advocated during wartime, ONLF spokesman Cadaani Hirmooge has nevertheless continued to put forward this viewpoint in the wake of the 2018 Asmara peace agreement.¹¹⁰

Regardless of which perspective one holds—increased rights around strategic resources or a complete cessation of resource extraction—such public engagement regarding oil and gas issues illustrates how natural resources have become integral to the cultural imagination and collective worldview of the Somali populace.¹¹¹ Rather than acting as a unifying material element, however, the subject of natural resources has become deeply divisive in SRS.

The emergence of multiple liberation fronts such as the ONLF in Ethiopia in the late 1960s and 80s, when various exploration companies attempted to prospect for and produce oil and gas, often undermined attempts by multiple regimes in Addis Ababa to secure access to natural resources in the Somali Region. Such efforts are looked upon with pride by ONLF members, with their success attributable not only to armed combatants but the wider pastoral population, who preferred to see the companies leave so that their livestock could graze in peace. One former ONLF combatant argued that their collective resistance was based on the fundamental human desire to be free, a key feature of nomadic and pastoralist culture: 'the same way they feel they should be able to take their livestock anywhere—is the same way they feel they are entitled to live a life on their own terms'.¹¹² Such views on the prevention of resource extraction stand in contrast to the sentiments expressed by Ali Dhaanto and the youth listening to his music.

Since 2018, and particularly in the aftermath of the 2020 *Guardian* report, there has been greater public engagement, advocacy and community mobilization campaigning on the health, environmental, economic and political ramifications of oil and gas. A noteworthy example is the work done by Shilaabo Youth Network in 2020, conducting interviews and producing short documentaries to foster community awareness and make accessible areas that have long been off-limits.¹¹³ Moreover, in the absence of an organized (violent) rebellion, members of the wider Somali community have been engaged in 'infrapolitics'—dispersed and largely invisible

109 For example, see: ONLF, 'Ethiopian Army Forcefully Evacuates Pastoralists for Oil Exploration in Ogaden', 15 October 2015, <http://onlf.org/?p=798>.

110 HGN Online TV, Twitter, 10 September 2002, <https://twitter.com/hbnonline/status/1568386106730635264?s=21&t=mRoLo6xl8a65sAYwqlEHOA>.

111 Jérémie Gilbert described the connections between natural resources and cultural rights: Jérémie Gilbert, *Natural Resources and Human rights: An Appraisal*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018, 10.

112 Interview with ex-ONLF combatant and businessman, Jijiga, October 2022.

113 Shilaabo Youth Network and Shilaabo 24, 'Jehdin victims part One', *Jeexdin*, 3 April 2021. https://www.facebook.com/watch/?extid=CL-UNK-UNK-UNK-IOS_GKoT-GK1C&mibextid=2Rb1fB&v=1063129897527125.

everyday forms of resistance that lack any central command.¹¹⁴ One such example is the proliferation of songs aimed at raising awareness about resources and exercising agency over resource sovereignty. An ex-combatant based in Jijiga expressed the view that while the federal government has thus far failed to satisfactorily engage Somalis over the handling of resources, the region would once again be subject to the repressive grip of the state in the event of ‘open resistance’.¹¹⁵ Nevertheless, if the status quo remains unchanged, the federal and regional government can sooner or later expect to face open opposition, among youth in particular.

Elders

Both federal and regional engagement with local elders on natural resources reveals major continuities between the EPRDF- and PP-led governments. According to 53-year-old Mahamud from Shilaabo, elders cannot refuse to go to a government meeting when called upon, despite the perception that regional elites do not conduct genuine/consensual consultations with local communities.¹¹⁶ Some elders, for instance, receive a rent from the government to serve as (loyal) community representatives whom the government can draw and rely on to legitimize and enforce top-down decisions at the community level. Thus, the neopatrimonialism that shaped politics in SRS under the EPRDF continues to be utilized to meet new political agendas, including those determining resource extraction.¹¹⁷ One prominent elder from Dhobaweyn and outspoken critic against violent extractive practices, explained that he was purposely left out of a June 2022 event in Calub where Takele Uma—then MoMP minister—presented ETB 113 million to the regional administration.¹¹⁸

According to the interviewed elder, only carefully vetted community representatives, who are briefed on what to say, were invited to Calub.¹¹⁹ Many similar claims by other elders during interviews, pointing to the consensual and coercive processes of co-optation employed by federal and regional state authorities. This begs the question of whether the changes and continuities seen in resource governance since the PP took power have transformed state-society relations or further institutionalized the status quo.

114 James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*, Yale University Press, 1985.

115 Interview with ex-combatant, Jijiga, 19 November 2022.

116 Interview with elder, Shilaabo, October, 2022.

117 Tobias Hagmann, ‘Fishing for votes in the Somali region: clan elders, bureaucrats and party politics in the 2005 elections’, in *Contested Power in Ethiopia: Traditional Authorities and Multi-party Elections*, eds. Kjetil Tronvoll and Tobias Hagmann, Leiden: Brill, 2011, 61–88. See discussion on ‘plastic hat elders’.

118 Takele Uma Banti, Twitter, 2 June 2022. <https://twitter.com/takeleuma/status/1532320466815397891?s=21&t=jOgaIBL0stzo-j52D23XCQ>.

119 Interview with, elder, Dhobaweyn, October 2022.



Cheque transfer press conference with Ahmed Shide, Mustafe Omer, Mustafe Omer and Takele Uma, left to right.
Source: Twitter account of former Minister Takele Uma, 2 June 2022, MoMP, <https://twitter.com/TakeleUma/status/1532320466815397891/photo/3>

Fuelling resistance

Despite the reforms introduced after 2018, a dynamic civil society capable of effectively championing resource-related issues has not yet emerged in SRS. Those who have spoken out on resource-related rights and the negative impacts of exploration activities have faced intimidation, as evidenced by the harassment of certain community elders in Haarcad following the 2020 Guardian report, and the subsequent arrival of federal authorities in the area.¹²⁰ Moreover, many citizens consider natural resources to be ‘strategic issues’ and ‘broad priorities’ that they simply do not have the time or capability to prioritize, especially amid a challenging socioeconomic environment characterized by recurrent drought and mass unemployment.¹²¹ For a community or clan elder, engaging in resource-related resistance may lead to the loss of financial support or access to opportunities and officials from the regional state. For a civil servant, it may cost them their job.

Lack of community engagement with natural resources is also in part an extension of the shortfall in resource-related knowledge among local and regional Somali officials. According to a senior SRS official and current member of the PP’s central committee, the full extent of

120 Interview with community elder, Dhobaweyn, October 2022.

121 Interview with community member, Shilaabo, 9 October 2022.

the federal government's agenda for resource extraction remains unclear.¹²² This suggests a strategic ambiguity on the part of the federal government, with regional officials excluded from the full details of the PP's resource extraction agenda. This ambiguity is reinforced by the lack of a clear plan for oil and gas sector development in the PP's Ten-Year Development Plan (2020/21—2029/30), entitled 'Ethiopia: An African Beacon of Prosperity' and produced in line with the 2020 HGER agenda.¹²³ While the plan makes mention of the oil sector and highlights the government's key objectives related to mining and petroleum development (enhancing foreign exchange and domestic revenue earnings, attracting investment and generating employment opportunities), it does not, compared to other resources such as gold, go into any detail regarding oil and gas.¹²⁴

122 Interview with senior government official, Jigjiga, October 2022.

123 See Chapter 5 of FDRE, 'A Homegrown Economic Reform Agenda: A Pathway to Prosperity', MoFED, March 2020, https://www.mofed.gov.et/media/filer_public/38/78/3878265a-1565-4be4-8ac9-dee9eaf4f1a/a_homegrown_economic_reform_agenda-_a_pathway_to_prosperity_-_public_version_-_march_2020-.pdf.

124 See Chapter 5.4, pp. 44–45 of FDRE, 'Ten Years Development Plan: A Pathway to Prosperity, 2021–2030', PMO, January 2021. <https://capacity4dev.europa.eu/library/ethiopia-ten-years-development-plan-2021-2030-planning-and-development-commission-federal-democratic-republic-ethiopia-2020>.

BUILDING PEACE: EQUITABLE RESOURCE GOVERNANCE IN THE OGADEN BASIN

The peace process between the ONLF and the Ethiopian government culminated in October 2018 with the signing of the Asmara peace agreement, after years of ‘twists and turns’ in the negotiations between both parties.¹²⁵ In 2019, the former ruling SDP was dissolved, with many of its members joining the PP. Despite widespread violence in other regions of the country since then, the SRS experienced relative peace and stability, attributable in part to the lack of resource-related activities taking place in the region. Even so, inadequate natural resource sovereignty afforded to the region by the federal government in practice continues to be perceived as a significant hurdle to lasting peace in the SRS.

As aforementioned, the Asmara peace agreement is lacking in several aspects, with insufficient consideration given to the crucial role played by oil and gas governance in the ONLF’s struggle. In fact, resources do not feature in the relatively superficial and brief points of the agreement. Nevertheless, it does offer an opportunity for peacebuilding around natural resources in its key provision for a joint committee tasked with addressing the root causes of conflict in the region.¹²⁶ The ONLF has however criticized the federal government for failing to implement this provision, as well as other aspects of the agreement.¹²⁷ Given the strategic importance to all parties of SRS’s natural resources, inclusive dialogue around the subject can serve as a significant entry point for further deliberation on substantive conflict drivers—not least oil and gas in the Ogaden basin.

Natural resource-related conflicts in SRS are part and parcel of the longstanding political conflict between the Ethiopian centre and the Somali periphery. As such, access to and use of resources needs to be settled through institutional frameworks implemented in inclusive and collaborative ways. In 2021, the SRS administration established the Commission for

125 Aden Abdi, ‘One year on: moving from war to peace in Ethiopia’, Conciliation Resources, 21 October 2019, <https://www.c-r.org/news-and-insight/one-year-moving-war-peace-ethiopia>.

126 FDRE and ONLF ‘Joint Declaration’.

127 ONLF, Twitter, 22 January 2022, https://twitter.com/onlfofficial/status/1485009030330437632?s=21&t=zeN4o_EoGPMFk_Gv97jDjw.

Investigation of Violence and Reconciliation and Reparation of Victims in Somali Region.¹²⁸ An explicit recognition by the Commission of the violence and displacement that took place around oil and gas exploration sites to date, would offer a means of integrating natural resource related human rights and concerns into the mainstream peace and reconciliation discourses and processes in the region.

The 2019 resource-sharing bill has failed to adequately address related grievances, which is why an equitable resource-sharing formula centred around local communities is viewed as critical for dealing with outstanding issues and moving forward. Such a formula would entitle communities to a share of resource benefits that is reflective of historical damages arising from health and environmental impacts, as well as multiple forms of dispossession. In the absence of arrangements along these lines—which would require major trust-building—new uprisings and even resistance movements could emerge, posing major obstacles to the commercial viability of oil and gas resources.¹²⁹

Synergies between state and society at the SRS level provide some hope that, at a minimum, priorities around good resource governance can be aligned. Senior government officials have expressed a commitment to prioritizing equitable benefit-sharing mechanisms and fostering inclusive natural resource management practices.¹³⁰ However, the problem persists, with the regional government having limited leverage compared to the federal government in managing crucial strategic resources like oil and gas. Moreover, concerns remain about the ambitions of the federal government under the PP, as it strives to maintain central control over access to the region's oil and gas resources. While the Somali regional administration is currently being circumvented rather than co-opted by the central government in the governance of the oil and gas sector, the centralising tendencies of the federal government in Addis Ababa raise fears that the previous EPRDF patronage system of oil and gas resource control may return, if activities in the sector are not sufficiently scrutinized. Peaceful resource governance requires transparency, accountability and the support of local communities. The absence of armed conflict and the departure of previously dominant politico-military and economic networks from the natural resource industry has created new hope for local communities and business networks to enjoy greater economic participation. For these hopes to be fully realized in SRS, however, a national-level transformation of the mining and petroleum sector is required.

128 Somali Regional State, 'Proclamation No. 205/2021: Establishment of the commission for Investigation of Violence and Reconciliation and Reparation of Victims in Somali Region', *Dhool Gazeta*, 19 July 2021. <https://www.lawethiopia.com/images/regional%20laws/somali/ProclamationNo.205-2021%20Establishment%20of%20the%20commission%20for%20Investigation%20of%20Violence%20and%20Reconciliation%20and%20Reparation%20of%20Victims%20in%20somali%20region.pdf>.

129 Interview with elder, Elele, 6 October 2022.

130 Interview with senior government official, Jijiga, 1 December 2022.

CONCLUSION

This report has shown that the federal government and SRS have yet to arrive at a consensus on how natural resources, including gas and oil, should be equitably managed and shared. Currently, there is no transparent road map on the state's plans to resume oil and gas exploration in the Ogaden Basin following the 2022 expulsion of Poly-GCL. Under successive Ethiopian administrations, the state's approach to oil and gas exploration in the Somali periphery has been defined by violence and dispossession. This in turn has inspired organized resistance aimed at disrupting the extraction of resources.

Communities impacted by natural resource exploration around Calub Hilaala cite a lack of accountability for the crisis in the Ogaden Basin, and the need for reparations, environmental rehabilitation and economic inclusion. This should include active efforts to include Somali youth in the opportunities presented by the natural resource sector. Moreover, inclusion in decision-making and consultative processes is key to mitigating resource-related conflicts around the Ogaden Basin in particular, and SRS more generally.

Despite shifts in relations between Jijiga and Addis Ababa since 2018, tensions between the Somali community and their regional representatives persist. The SRS leadership, often considered an extension of Addis Ababa, will need to prove its newfound political visibility among the senior ranks of the PP is not just rhetorical. In terms of developing a hydrocarbon strategy, this should involve extensive consultations and a community-centred approach. Given that the 2019 revenue-sharing formula has been criticized by civilians and politicians alike for its vagueness, there is a window of opportunity for regional representatives to use oil and gas as political capital with which to enhance their national political standing.

In the context of the longstanding and deep-seated exclusion experienced by Somali communities, recent efforts by the government to engage local communities around natural resource governance have been welcomed by some. There are, however, signs that the PP is pursuing an EPRDF-style policy of co-opting community figures in order to gain greater legitimacy for its top-down decision-making on oil and gas management, at the expense of public participation. Nevertheless, despite the risks involved in exercising resource-related agency, those from SRS and its diaspora are engaged in 'everyday' forms of resistance, marking an important development in the post-2018 political scene.

Policy Considerations

Accountability: The government should acknowledge resource-related violence—including human rights abuses, economic dispossession, environmental degradation and forced evictions—that occurred in the vicinity of oil and gas exploration sites. Incorporating resource-related rights and concerns into the newly established regional reconciliation commission would mark a significant step towards integrating resource-related concerns into mainstream discourse and establishing a relevant platform for dialogue and action.

Reparatory justice: The federal government should prioritize reparatory justice aimed at rectifying the natural resource industry's longstanding and systemic inequities. Such measures could include land restitution, compensation for past harms, capacity-building initiatives, and targeted investments aimed at empowering local communities.

Resource sovereignty: The SRS government should assume a prominent role in actively advocating for Somali hydrocarbon interests, including championing economic inclusion and fostering communal participation in the oil and gas sector.

Transparency, consultation and consent: The federal government should prioritize transparency in its natural resource agenda, making regulations, agreements and future plans easily accessible to the public. Additionally, the government should support initiatives that enable local communities to meaningfully participate in and benefit from resource extraction activities.

Social and environmental responsibility: The federal government should prioritize sustainable development in SRS's natural resource industry, promoting responsible, environmentally-conscious exploration and extraction practices, and making investments in local-level social infrastructure and services.

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